

Quality Standards for Teaching Social Farming

What future social farmers need to know to be successful

Short version





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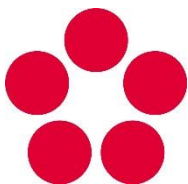
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Introduction

In many European countries, agriculture can be characterised by a momentous change in agro-structure and its demographic environment. Farmers respond to these changes in multiple ways. One of them is to diversify agricultural production. Against this background, social farming recently is attracting greater interest as one possible diversification strategy. Likewise, in the field of social work the potential of agriculture as a “setting” for employment, therapy or rehabilitation is receiving a more and more positive reception.

An increasing number of farms have discovered social farming as another string to their bow. However, in most countries there is a lack of pathways for a professional qualification in social farming, which is essential for improving the quality of care provided on farms, and for the wider development of social farming. As a professional field, social farming combines the knowledge and skills of normally unrelated fields such as agriculture/horticulture and social work. A broad set of professional and personal competencies appear necessary. In many European countries, higher education institutions have recognised the need to create and establish new offers for a qualification in social farming on higher education level in recent years.

There is a high demand for scientific research as well as educational innovations and teaching material supporting social farming.

This paper wants to support higher education institutions that are offering or planning to offer social farming courses. It aims at determining quality standards that set the frame for high-quality education in social farming. The quality standards for teaching social farming refer to the teaching content and its prioritisation. This way they can support university course offers on social farming and its comparability in Europe.

This publication on quality standards for teaching social farming is the first result of the project “Social Farming in Higher Education” (SoFarEDU). The quality standards for teaching social farming also constitute the base for the development of a curriculum and teaching material. The project is funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme. The project started in September 2017 and will end in August 2020.

This is a short version of the original research report, which includes detailed information on the research process and the individual results. They have been left out here to allow a focus on the actual quality standards for teaching social farming.

A Common Definition for Social Farming?

So far there is no commonly accepted definition of social farming. All over Europe, social farming presents itself in a number of ways. Even the term to describe social farming and what it contains varies from country to country. On the other hand, a lot of client groups and types of social farming are overlapping and only their priority may vary.

However, as a basis for further work on quality standards for teaching social farming a common definition was needed, that reflects social farming in the participating countries as well as ties in with already existing definitions on the European level. In 2012 the European Economic and Social Committee drafted conclusions and recommendations about social farming¹ (EESC, 2012). The document also provides a definition of social farming. SoFarEDU took this definition as a foundation on which their own definition was developed and which reflects their specific social farming characteristics. This common definition now is a constituent element of the quality standards for teaching social farming. It can be found on page five of this paper.

Relevant Professions and Qualifications

Social farming affects various professions with different backgrounds and qualifications. As the term “social farming” suggests, professions and vocations of the “green” sector (farmer, forester, gardener) and of the social and educational sector (e.g. social workers/social pedagogues, educators, teachers, special education teachers) are predominant. In addition, the healthcare sector (healthcare assistant, carers, psychologists, therapists) is very important in many countries.

Vocational education and training pathways in the individual partner countries are as follows:

Agriculture

In most European countries no formal vocational qualification is required to become a farmer. A farmer in most cases is a person who manages a farm income-oriented and at his or her own risk. Nevertheless, a vocational qualification of a certain degree in many of the partner countries is recommended and required for a range of activities in the framework of farming, like buying farmland or plant protection. These activities and the respective qualification may differ between the countries.

The structure and its conditions of agriculture training vary from country to country, depending on the respective system of vocational training in general. Due to the comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications ensured by the Bologna Process, the structure of agricultural studies in Europe is easier to compare. Although each university offers courses of study with individual prioritisation, even the content of compulsory modules in agricultural studies is very similar.

¹ European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) (2012). *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social farming: green care and social and health policies* (own-initiative opinion) adopted on 12 December 2012 (Reference: NAT/539-EESC-2012-1236). Retrieved from <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/eesc-opinion-social-farming>.

Social Work

The usual path to becoming a social worker is to study social work at a university or university of applied sciences and complete at least a bachelor degree. In most European countries this is obligatory. Same as with agricultural studies, the structure and content of the studies are similar.

There are diverse professions that specialise on certain aspects of social work, for example in the field of care, therapy, education, social policy or social law. They often do not require university studies, but other forms of qualification, like vocational schools or further training. That said, in the UK, at least, nurses require a research-based MSc degree since the 2000s. Some of these professions participate in social farming e.g. nurse and geriatric nurse, social assistant.

Educational issues play a vital role in social farming in some countries. Depending on the target group the relevant profession would range between kindergarten teachers, adult educators or special needs educators. The pathways of vocational education for these professions are not identical and could vary between basic vocational training and university studies.

Required Additional Professional Qualification

In none of the SoFarEDU partner countries a special qualification or further training required by law that defines and names a “Social Farmer” or that deals generally with social farming issues.

As there are no formal vocational qualifications required to become a farmer, there is no additional qualification on farming needed for a social worker starting a social farm. Special restrictions and qualification requirements over the purchase of farmland exist which vary from country to country.

The situation is different for farmers who want to start social farming, because of high qualification standards in social work. The form of social farming and the respective client group set the scene for the kind of additional professional qualification required and whether it is necessary at all. Named examples include a series of short courses sufficient to offer equine assisted therapy and the extensive additional qualification on special needs education obligatory for farmers working in sheltered workshops in Germany.

Required Competences in the Eyes of Practitioners

The identification of key competences necessary in social farming was based on the knowledge and primarily, the experience of stakeholders in this sector. Stakeholders, in this sense, are practitioners in social farming or persons directly related to it. These experience-based key competences are of great significance for developing quality standards for teaching social farming because they add another perspective especially on the content and its prioritisation.

In this case, competence means that one needs certain knowledge of the subject and is able to apply related skills. The terms “knowledge” and “skills” are defined by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)² (European Commission, 2008, p. 11):

“**knowledge**” means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual;

“**skills**” means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments);

In the light of the above-mentioned significance, the results of the interviews may lead to the following conclusions:

- In social farming, it is very important to be able to apply knowledge and to be skilled to do so. Higher education and other vocational training in social farming should consider this and emphasize content and methods to learn and improve skills. This could be done by including exercises and other practical work in the lessons or by internships.
- A basic requirement for a person involved in social farming is a personality that includes personal competences related to empathy and an understanding of human nature. These are personal prerequisites that can only be further extended or trained.
- “Social Work” as a general topic is of high importance and should be regarded as such in high-quality education referred to social farming.
- Knowledge and skills about the topic “Clients” received the highest ratings and were considered essential by many of the interview partners. Education on social farming should take that into account and enable the students to gain knowledge about symptoms or disabilities and interact with the different kind of client groups.
- Communication in its diverse forms is necessary for many situations in social farming and thus affects a lot of topics related to social farming. Communication should consequently have a prominent position as a separate subject, but should also be part of other subjects as well.
- Basic concepts and terms of farming and social work are an essential part of a study programme on social farming. If and how much these topics are deepened or broadened by other subjects depends on the focus of the study programme and the country.
- The ability to undertake good business practice, in particular, financial management and the skills to apply such practices and calculations are crucial for students of social farming and

² European Commission (2008). *The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

should be a basic component of student learning in teaching entrepreneurship in social farming.

- Not all topics have the same importance for every country. Therefore the frame that is set by the quality standards should allow enough flexibility to adjust a common social farming curriculum to the respective needs and challenges.

Quality Standards for Teaching Social Farming

The project „Social Farming in Higher Education“ (SoFarEDU) was established to support university course offers on social farming and its comparability in Europe or at least in the countries involved. Before the development of concrete teaching content and learning material is possible, it was necessary at first to also determine and formulate general quality standards for teaching social farming.

The following quality standards have been developed on the basis of the project’s research results on

- the characterization of social farming in the participating countries,
- the professions involved in social farming and their qualification requirements,
- competences required from the perspective of experienced practitioners of social farming.

What follows represent the product of these research results and the discussions of the project partners based on them. Against this background, the following basic principles and essential study areas for their quality standards on teaching social farming are recommended.

Basic Principles

When it comes to social farming the starting position in different European countries varies greatly. While in some countries, social farming is an acknowledged concept and practice, in others only a few farms exist. As there is currently no unique definition within Europe of the fundamentals of social farming, SoFarEDU wants to create a set of fundamentals which underpins the teaching of social farming. These quality standards for teaching social farming constitute the base for further development of a curriculum and teaching material.

In this case, the quality standards for teaching social farming mostly refer to the teaching content and its prioritisation and not so much on the way it should be taught. “Quality Standards” therefore relate both to the subjects and topics included in the programme (so that all practitioners share a common base knowledge) and to the skills and experience the students develop during the programme, in accordance to standard Bologna Accord procedures.

Social farming reflects a wide range of offers, forms, providers and client groups. This diversity should be represented in the curriculum, which is based on the following definition of social farming

(a modified version of an approach by the European Economic and Social Committee³ (EESC, 2012) (SoFarEDU inclusions in *italic*):

Social Farming adopts a multifunctional view of agriculture that combines farming with social services/health care at the local level. It can help to improve social and environmental awareness, in accordance with social and solidarity principles.

Even though social farming comprises a very wide range of activities, they always have two elements in common: a) the activities take place on a farm *or market garden* and b) they are designed for people who – either temporarily or permanently – have specific needs, including educational needs. [...]

Social farming could thus be provisionally defined as a cluster of activities that use agricultural resources – both animal and plant – to generate social services in rural or semi-rural areas, such as rehabilitation, therapy, sheltered jobs, lifelong learning and other activities contributing to social integration. [...] In this sense, it is about – among other things – making farms places where people with particular needs can take part in daily farming routines as a way of *maintaining their state/condition* or furthering their development, making progress and improving their well-being.

Social farming combines professional fields from the sector of agriculture and social work that normally bear little relationship to each other. A common study programme should take this into consideration with the help of specifically designed modules with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity, and which provide an insight into each other's professional field in order to provide a common grounding to those coming from a specific discipline.

The knowledge and skills of students from different professional backgrounds should be respected and recognised. Certain content should therefore not be compulsory for all, but should be offered in elective courses. Students could then choose the courses whose content they are particularly interested in or in which they have a particular need to catch up.

In the light of the above, it emerges, that higher education in social farming is not able to replace a complete study of agriculture or social work. It merely represents a focused combination of both study programmes.

Social farmers work closely with humans, animals and nature. In addition to the wide knowledge of these spheres, practical skills, therefore, have great significance and must form part of the basic learning.

Not all topics bear the same importance for every country. Therefore it should be possible to adjust a common social farming curriculum to the respective needs and challenges across jurisdictions. Based on a fixed core of study areas it will be possible to set individual priorities, create new contents and use a variety of approaches by which the subjects are taught, thus to allow for flexibility and development.

³ European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) (2012). Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social farming: green care and social and health policies (own-initiative opinion) adopted on 12 December 2012 (Reference: NAT/539-EESC-2012-1236). Retrieved from <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/eesc-opinion-social-farming>.

The quality standards do not qualitatively distinguish between the various levels of study (bachelor's or master's degrees and also programmes of further education on social farming); instead, they set forth the study areas and their central content to be covered by higher education programmes on social farming.

Overall Goals of Teaching Social Farming

The overall learning outcome of the programme is as follows:

Graduates are able to plan, process and evaluate comprehensive tasks in the complex field of social farming as well as to control and organise processes of subareas of social farming independently and under their own responsibility. They can appropriately respond to frequent changes by using professional and personal competences.

They are able to do so because they have a broad and integrated knowledge of social farming, including the scientific basis and its practical implementation. They are familiar with current professional developments and have developed a critical understanding of the theories and methods that set the frame for social farming.

On a personal level, graduates are able to work in a team and have a sense of responsibility and entrepreneurial thinking. They are skilled in managing people, in assisting with the professional development of others and in reflectively moderating team-related conflicts.

Graduates are able to present complex specialised problems and their solutions to external parties or develop them in cooperation with others. Finally, they are able to determine, reflect and evaluate goals for learning and work processes and to shape these processes independently and sustainably.

Study Areas

Within the quality standards for teaching social farming, the content of such study programmes forms an essential part. Here only the general content of a study programme on social farming can be defined and it will be the task of the respective university to further differentiate this content according to their specific environment and approach.

As a result of this research, and reflection, the following study areas are defined as essential:

Introduction to Social Farming

An introduction to social farming will provide an overview of its scope and concept as a diversification strategy in agriculture and a „setting“ for employment, therapy or rehabilitation.

Contents: History of social farming; diversity of social farming in Europe; different models of social farming; added value of social farming to society, participants and ecology; current research topics; networks; goals and values; social farming in its ethical and societal context; financial issues and funding of social farming; legal issues.

Basics of Social Work

The integration of people with mental illness and with special needs, with parenting deficits or dependency-related illness into agricultural processes, make high demands on a professional and personal level. Social Farmers should know how to integrate and use relevant information on different professional areas in social work. Education in agriculture or gardening does not offer the possibility to be prepared for these demands. This unit (and the respective unit on agriculture) shall fill this gap. It provides an insight into the professional field and into the basics of social work.

Contents: History and structure of social work; key theoretical approaches and paradigms of social work; basic terminology; social work methods (practical methods and theories, tools and techniques of social work); basics of (social) psychology and its importance for social workers; ethics for helping professions; social policy and legal issues in social work; target groups of social work; communication (for example conversation, interview and counselling techniques); reflection of professional action (for example supervision); vocational and occupational education.

Basics of Agriculture

To work on a farm requires knowledge of the basic elements which constitute agriculture: soil, plants, and animals. In addition, an understanding of the usual agricultural processes is necessary. Without the corresponding competences and skills, it is hardly possible to serve, support and employ people on a farm.

Contents: Societal and economic relevance of agriculture; agriculture as an element of rural work and life; characteristics of farming (seasonality, weather-dependency, machine application versus manual labour); basic terminology; fundamentals of soil science, crop production as well as animal husbandry and welfare; non-productive functions and activities; current discussions in agricultural policy and their effect on farming; marketing of agricultural products and services.

Relevant Target Groups in Social Farming

The target group of social farming are the clients who visit a farm for educational or therapeutic reasons, or who live and work on a farm. To serve and support them in the best possible way is highly demanding and requires knowledge about symptoms or disabilities and skills that enable graduates to interact with the different kind of client groups.

Contents: Variety of possible clients on a farm; types of disabilities, symptoms, disorders and needs; behavioural displays; cultural background; abilities relevant for social farming; suitability of client groups to diverse models of social farming; communication techniques; educational activities for children; work pedagogy.

Adjustment of the Farm Environment and Farming Activities to the Requirements of Social Farming

Social farming takes place on a farm and in an environment that was built and most likely used solely for agricultural production. Thus the transformation, partially or as a whole, of an agricultural business to social farming represents a major challenge for all involved. First, a graduate needs to know about legal and other requirements and be able to manage this change of business. In addition, the material assets of the farm need to be transformed into a supportive and safe environment for

clients. This includes construction measures as well as the adjustment of activities to the respective group of clients.

Contents: Change management; legal framework; compatibility of care and agricultural production; adaptation of technical equipment as well as space and buildings; health and safety measures; time, scheduling and pace of work; cooperation with various stakeholders.

Entrepreneurship

Social farming operates as a business, and the success of the business depends upon more than the quality skills of the practitioners. This study area focuses on entrepreneurship, innovation, business design and practice, management of employees and other topics important for making the social farm a successful and financially rewarding enterprise.

Working on the students' own ideas, plans and concepts regarding social farming is a core focus of this study area. Another integral part is to impart basic knowledge in the field of business administration, required to make the combination of social work and agriculture also financially sustainable.

Contents: Basic terms and methods for financial calculation and the financial assessment of social farming offers; marketing of social services in agriculture; start-up opportunities and constellations in social farming; financial issues and funding; methods and skills to develop business ideas in the sector of social farming; design and development of own business models; models of rural businesses and rural development.

Practical Placement

The SoFarEDU partners strongly believe that the integration of practical training and the offer to study social farming in practice are essential and of high value for a successful study of social farming. Graduates will benefit from the orientation toward practice and hands-on education because they will be prepared for the successful practical application of their skills. If possible, this integration of practice should be part of all study areas and can take different forms, from practical exercises to field trips. In addition to that, a long-term internship should be a separate part of a study programme that allows an insight into various sectors and forms of social farming.

Conclusion

The aim of the project "Social Farming in Higher Education" is to provide universities and professional schools of agriculture, rural development, social work, and social pedagogy with a framework of subjects, and their content necessary for teaching social farming. This publication presents one part of the puzzle in the whole SoFarEDU project.

This is one step towards addressing the question "What does a future social farmer or a social worker involved in social farming need to know?" And consequently: "What does a teacher need to teach?" These questions have been addressed by the Quality Standards For Teaching Social Farming part of this project.

The actual document “Quality Standards for Teaching Social Farming” will be followed by the “Curriculum of Social Farming” which is based on the research performed for this text. It serves as a foundation for teaching material, which includes an abstract book enumerating in short form the cross-sectional topics covering the wide scope of different themes in social farming. Also, a textbook consisting of fully developed chapters constitutes another part of the SoFarEDU project (a subset of the topics in the abstract book). This textbook is accompanied by methodological material which serves as a manual for the elaboration of more abstracts from the abstract book into fully developed chapters and offers a map for working out further teaching material in detail.

The Quality Standards for Teaching Social Farming, together with the other study material will present a useful toolkit for teaching social farming in different higher education systems and across borders in different countries.